Central Men's Group 7:30 A.M.

BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Lafayette, Indiana
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PROVIDENCE
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Luke 12:22-31
November 26, 1972

If you are able to get past the way history has romanticized them, the Norman Rockwell portrayals and Currier and Ives prints; if you are able to get back of school plays and poems, the ever-popular image of fresh snow, starched white collars, and long picnic tables laden with butterball turkeys, shrimp cocktail and fresh-cut crysanthemums; if you can cut through all the extra baggage 350 years of American adulation has heaped upon them, what remains is a truly remarkable - and intriguing-group of very brave people.

101 of them crowded onto the small ship Mayflower in September of 1620 and things were bad even at the start. They were scheduled to sail in two ships, but one developed trouble causing a delay and eventually the decision was made to pack all their belongings and crowd themselves into one. It took 66 days to cross the Atlantic, a remarkable passage in those days in that only one of them died in route.

Contrary to the popular image, only 35 of the original 101 were religious disserters. The other 66 were recruited to make the voyage by backers of the project in order to have sufficient number to assure a self-sustaining colony. It was, of course, too late in the year to do any planting when they arrived. Work parties went ashore every day and began constructing a crude "common house", while others looked for food. They chose the cite for their "plantation" on what had been a large Indian corn field, and one of their first discoveries was a cache of corn the Indians had hidden. Their first encounter with the Indians was hostile, involving the exchange of shots and arrows, although we know now that the entire Indian population on the Eastern sea board was badly decimated by disease - three quarters of them had already died - and they never came around again until the following spring and this time as friends.

Breeds of Corn meal per person

It was a terrible winter. William Bradford recorded that on some days two or three persons died; and that, on occasion, only a half dozen were well enough to work. Starvation was held at bay by the supplies they had carried in the Mayflower, but hunger was a constant companion. Through it all though the tiny village continued to rise.

- tell about Calories - 5,000 porridge made of peas, cheese, ale - 1/2 lb. of meat

On March 16, 1621, an Indian appeared in the community -Samoset- who spoke English, and told the surprised Pilgrims of another English speaking Indian by the name of Squanto.

Squanto had been kidnapped by an English trapper in 1614, sold in slavery in Spain, had escaped to England where he lived with an official of the Newfoundland Company. After making at least one round trip across the ocean, he jumped ship in 1618, only to discover that his entire tribe had been wiped out by disease the year before.

Samoset and Squanto arranged a meeting with the chief of the Wampanoags, Massasoit, which resulted in a friendship treaty, and of course, the famous advice about planting a fish in each corn mound.

By late spring the 50 pilgrims had their planting done, eleven houses built and all were well. 20 acres were put into Indian corn and six acres of peas and barley. The barley didn't do very well, the peas were a disaster - but the corn grew beautifully.

So it was in the fall of 1621 that the 50 knew that they could survive and they planned an event to mark their remarkable accomplishment. Edward Winslow, one of the pilgrims, wrote about it to a friend, in what is the only eyewitness account of the first Thanksgiving.

> "Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. The four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, whch they brought to the planation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

It was the custom in midieval England to celebrate a successful crop with a "Harvest Home Festival", several days of games, sporting, cakes, and ale. It was such a good time that Henry VIII had ruled that the festivities couldn't begin until the harvest was in. That was what the Pilgrims had in mind when they invited their Indian friends to the feast. But they did add another dimension - a dimension with its roots in the offering of the

"First Fruits" described in 26th Chapter of Deuteronomy. I can imagine that the words had particular significance for them:

> "..the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

So they called it Thanksgiving - and they thanked God for bringing them through - even though fifty of them didn't make it; and they thanked God for shelter - which they had constructed out of the logs they had cut with their backs to the cold and forbidding wilderness; and they thanked God for the food - which they had planted and which had grown with a generous assist from the Indians.

They believed, that it is to say, in God's providence - in some rather difficult circumstances. They believed that everything would "work out" even when it obviously wasn't working out very well. They became the most eloquent practitioners of that strange advice Jesus one time passed on to his disciples: "do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing."

Please notice that they did not substitute trust in God for hard work. They believed in providence: but they also died out there in the wilderness building their cabins. Their faith was that God would be with them - in the bad times: on those gray days when little children died of pneumonia: and on that good day when the corn was harvested. They knew, in a way not many of us do, that existence required every resource they could muster: and still they could share their deep gratitude with God. They believed in Providence - a theological anachronism to many people today - because we get it confused with some very bad theology which happens also to be very popular theology.

General George Patton for instance, who summoned the chaplain the night before the attack on Bastogne, and ordered him to write a "good weather" prayer, because he desparately needed air support. Or Cranmer, who wrote most of the Anglican Prayer Book, and penned one that goes like this:

> "O Almighty God, who for the sin of man didst once drown all the world...
> we humbly beseech thee that although we for all our iniquities have

worthily deserved a plague of rain, yet upon our true repentance
Thou wilt send us such weather as that we may receive the fruits of
the earth in due season..."

Or worse, the assumption that God's hand and will may be seen in a disaster at sea costing thousands of lives - which, in fact, was the result of faulty wiring in the boiler room.

Or more familiar, the assumption that God's will is operational when a loved one dies: or when we feel the sing of personal tragedy and ask ("What have I done to deserve this?")

Or the other side of the coin that assumes that God will provide in a special way for those who love and serve him.

That's bankrupt, empty theology, and I continue to be amazed at how many people seem to believe it. One writer put it succinctly: "The idea that God's providence means that he looks after those who serve him by a special use of his power in terms of favoritism is an immoral idea and insulting to both man and God." (Weatherhead, The Christian Agnostic P.208)

Jesus never promised his followers immunity from difficulty: he never told them they would be healthy, wealthy and wise, nor that they would live happily ever after. In fact, he predicted,with relentless consistancy, that to follow him was to suffer and to be persecuted. What he did promise was that he would be with them in the good days and the bad, and that he would give them the power to overcome the world - which doesn't mean a full stomach and a fat wallet: rather it means strength and power and heart to live through anything life deals out with joy and peace.

You see, accidents happen in God's world. He has created a system in which accidents can and do happen: good ones and tragic ones. Some of them are a result of human ignorance and sin. God doesn't cause war, for instance. War happens - because men can't get along. God doesn't cause race riots - that happens because for centuries white people have been oppressing black people. God doesn't cause cars to collide or airliners to crash or towns to be flooded or little children to die of leukemia. Cancer is an accident - and some day we will know how to prevent it and heal it - but there is no way to blame God for causing it.

We believe in a God who has created a universe - a world - an ecosystem - and placed

his special gift of life in it. We believe that God loves his creation, and that he has a special love for man. We believe that he has an intent for his creation, a plan, and that ultimately the will of God for his creation will be done. But he has also built freedom into the system, and because of freedom there is risk and danger and accidents and a lot of suffering. To have it otherwise, to have a God who arranges every event in life is to be deprived of that which makes us men - our freedom: it is also to fly in the face of the testimony of our faith which sees man free to do as he pleases: free to go to hell, if that's what he wants.

To believe otherwise: to believe in a God who keeps popping in and out of the system he has created - knocking down an airplane here - saving a family there, giving this man 95 years and that one 25 - is not providence: it's just wrong. And the worst part about it is that it prevents us from coming to grips with what God really offers us.

The late John Oman said it this way..."...no other delusion so shuts us off from real trust in God or from any need of learning his mind...Until faith in Providence as mere beneficence breaks down, the faith which reconciles us to God in face of every conceivable evil cannot arise."

The faith which the Pilgrims obviously carried with them into the new world and expressed on a November day in 1621: the faith Jesus talked about when he advised his disciples not to worry about food and clothes and shelter, is a faith that regards God as the third party in every situation. It is a faith that sees the creative possibility in every situation, and that knows that regardless of what is happening now, God's love remains constant and his will cannot be destroyed. We learn that, after all, at the foot of a cross on which the very son of God was put to death - dishonestly, unnecessarily, cruelly. And if God could handle that one - if he could turn that disaster into the saving revelation of his love, certainly he can deal lovingly and creatively with your troubles and mine.

Providence is always easier to believe in retrospect. I don't think it's given us to know how God works in the confines of the events that are happening today. I can say that personally and honestly. The major descisions in my life have never, at the time, been surrounded by a sense of certainty, nor the conviction that God was in fact involved in the staging. But looking back - I gladly join all those who have been able to say with

Austin Farrer, "...we can see how circumstances have shaped us, even in spite of ourselves, and regret that we have put so many obstacles in the path of a mercy we failed to discern."

God is part of life. In him we "live and move and literally have our being." He is most like a father to us. And if I know anything about that, having had a father who loved me, and being a father I know that fatherhood is a matter of loving and granting freedom; of loving so much that it hurts when they stumble and fall, of being humiliated when they are humiliated, of laughing because they laugh. If I know anything about fatherhood, I know that it's having a plan - a will - for them that includes health and well being and happiness; but never enforcing that plan so that they fail to grow and learn and become. If I know anything about fatherhood, it's in terms of granting freedom, freedom to walk out of the yard, to ride a bicycle, to play football, to drive a car, to go away to school, to get married - and then hurting deeply when the risks of the freedom granted turn into disaster. A father can't prevent accidents in the life of his children if he loves them enough to allow them to be free. But he can keep loving - and be there to comfort and cradle and wipe away the tears.

That's what God promised to be to us. And that's what his Providence means to me. He is present. He does provide - something far more essential than food and clothes, namely love and strength. That's what he provided the pilgrims: for that they gave thanks. That's what our Lord had in mind when he assured his disciples that God would take care of their needs. All of that - best expressed in an old hymn . .

~~Gratitude is best expressed in a shout, an embrace, a song. So let us sing our thanksgiving this day - for a world that provides, for love that gives meaning to our lives - and for a God who is with us.~~

"Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom his world rejoices.

O may this bounteous God
Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts
And blessed peace to cheer us. AMEN